



# TONTOGANY'S DEEP SECRET

*The Unknown Son  
of Thomas Ward Custer*

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MARK A. MINER

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Tontogany, Ohio—a small, sleepy village in rural Washington Township, Wood County—harbored a deep Custer family secret for many years in the late 1800s. It was a secret everyone knew but no one publicly discussed, presumably out of respect for the Custer family and others involved who felt a taint of shame. When the secret could no longer be kept hidden, and was forced into the open, the news was downplayed to an almost ridiculous extent.

The secret involved an innocent boy raised by his maternal grandparents who grew to become a popular local oilfield laborer—Thomas C. “Tommy” Custer—born out of wedlock to two-time Medal of Honor recipient Captain Thomas Ward Custer and a local farm girl, Rebecca Miner. He probably was conceived when his father was home on military leave, and was born between 1866 and 1871. Tommy was just a boy when his famous father was killed at Little Bighorn, and presumably had no memory of the man.

Tommy’s story went public only upon his own untimely death as a young man in 1896. In printing it, the editor of the *Wood County Sentinel* buried the story, perhaps worried that a detailed obituary would upset the delicate anonymity that the story enjoyed. It was published on an inside page in the August 7, 1896 issue, below items about John Miller’s barn fire in West Millgrove, and Irv M. Wiggins’ new home in Indianapolis. Tommy’s relationship to his famous father was treated as an afterthought. The obituary, in full, read:

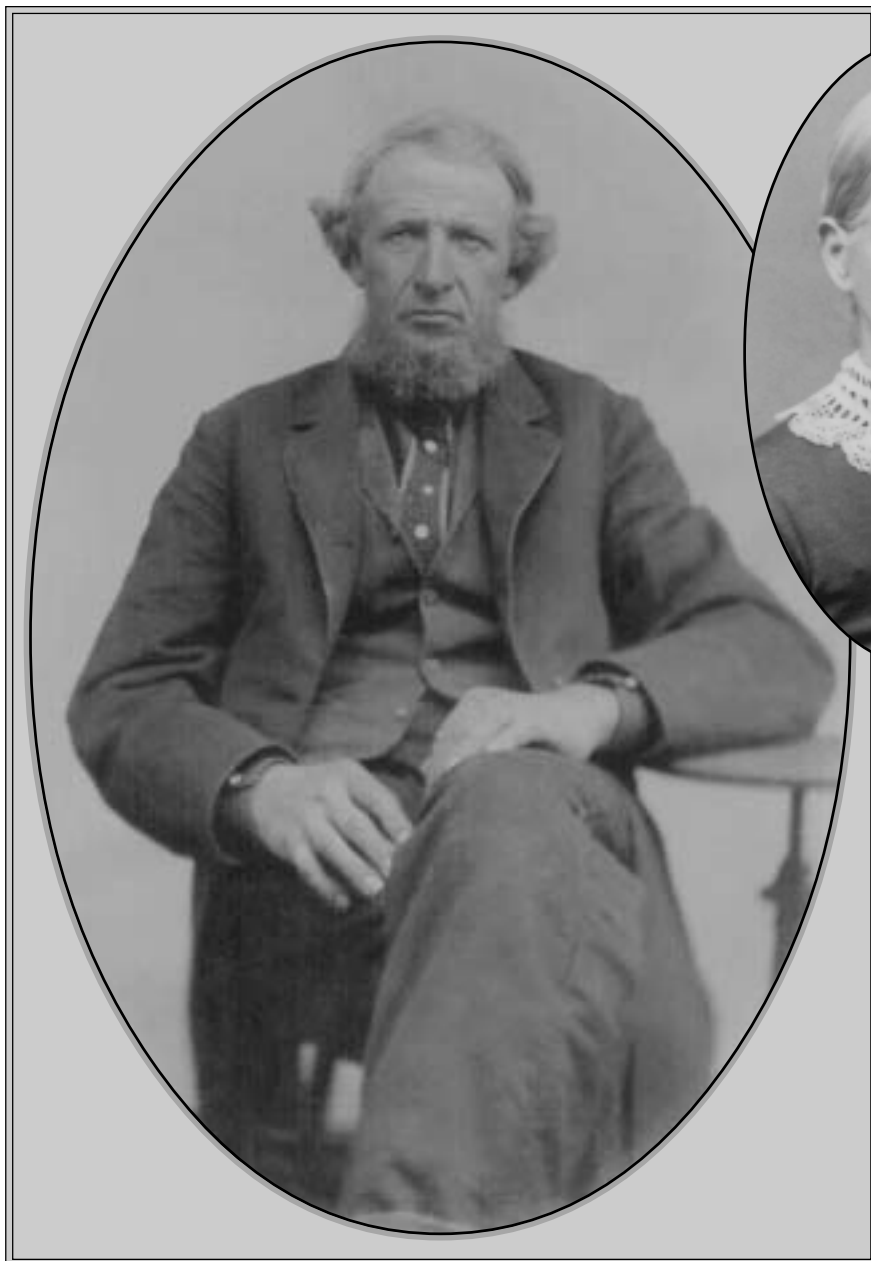
#### **Nephew of Gen. Custer Dead.**

Saturday evening occurred the death Tom Custer, at his home at Tontogany, from an attack of typhoid fever. Deceased was aged 30 years, and leaves a wife. He was a nephew of General Custer [sic], of Indian fighting fame. The funeral was held on Monday. Tom Custer, father of the deceased, was also killed at the Battle of the Big Horn, where Gen. Custer was slain.<sup>1</sup>

The privacy of Tommy’s identity has largely been maintained over the ensuing years. It has become more widely known only as a result of Beverly (Hansen) Miner’s genealogical research in the mid-1980s, coinciding with Carl F. Day’s work on the biography of his father, *Tom Custer: Ride to Glory*. Tommy’s relationship to his famous paternal family is found in no history books of Wood County or of northwest Ohio, and certainly not in any biographies of the General or any memoirs by the General’s widow, Elizabeth “Libbie” (Bacon) Custer.

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*Above*—Thomas C. “Tommy” Custer as a boy in Tontogany, Ohio. Private collection.



**Left**—The couple who raised Thomas C. Custer—his grandparents, Samuel and Susanna (Hueston) Minerd—who were longtime neighbors and friends of the Emanuel Custers in both Harrison and Wood Counties, Ohio. Private collection.

farm fields of Tontogany, in northwest Ohio. There, the two clans were close neighbors and transacted business together, leading to the fateful liaison that produced Tommy.

Tommy's story brings into sharper focus the misty, hazy years between 1856 and 1887 when the Emanuel Custers and their adult children resided or owned farms near Tontogany, an often overlooked Custer era. The Minerds, in contrast, are acknowledged among the "First Families" of Wood County for their role as local pioneers.<sup>3</sup>

This article records the known facts of the story, through the best and highest quality documentation available. The goal is not in any way to tarnish the reputation of the Custer family as honored American heroes. Rather, the objective is to share information widely, invite input from diverse sources and ultimately to gain knowledge and broaden understanding of the past. Unfortunately, the full truth is not likely to be completely known.

The irony is that Tommy and his wife produced no children, and thus have no direct offspring living today to tell their tale. It was their elderly Minerd/Miner cousins who told modern day researchers the wisps of stories they remembered from their long ago childhood in Tontogany.

In addition to the Day book, the story of Tommy was the theme of the 2002 National Minerd-Miner-Miner Reunion in Western Pennsylvania, and at the Little Big Horn Associates' Great Lakes Conference in 2003. It also has been published in greater detail on the award-winning website, Minerd.com, upon which this article is based.<sup>2</sup>

Tommy's saga does not begin with his birth, but spans three generations of close relationships between the Custer and Minerd-Miner families. It harks back to the villages of New Rumley and Scio, Harrison County in eastern Ohio in the early 1800s, when both sets of Tommy's grandparents lived there as neighbors—Samuel and Susanna (Hueston) Minerd and Emanuel H. and Maria (Ward) Custer. The story continues as both the Minerds and Custers migrated westward in the mid-1800s as pioneers of the flat, rich-soil

### **The Quiet, Early Days in Harrison County**

Tommy Custer's maternal grandfather, Samuel Minerd (1815–1904) was born near Scio, North Township, Harrison County, Ohio, the son of John and Mary Magdalena (Kohl) Minard Sr. Like his father and brothers, Samuel was a farmer, and typically spelled the family name "Minert" or "Minerd" in the early days. In 1839, in Harrison County, Samuel married Susanna Hueston (1818–1893), and they began to raise a family. Their children were Jemima Burditt, Sarah Shepard, Pera Jewell, Alpheus Minerd, Jacob Minerd and Rebecca Behme-Kearns.

Among the Minerds' neighbors there in the 1830s and 1840s was the family of Emanuel H. and Maria (Kirkpatrick) Custer and young children, including George Armstrong "Autie" Custer and Thomas Ward Custer. The others of Emanuel and Maria's large family of step and full children were David Kirkpatrick, Lydia Ann Reed, James Custer, Samuel Custer, Nevin Johnson Custer, Boston Custer and Margaret Emma (Custer) Calhoun.

As residents of a small rural community, Emanuel





**Above**—An old postcard view of the Custer birthplace in New Rumley. Author's collection.  
**Inset, right and above**—Thomas C. Custer's paternal grandparents, Emanuel and Maria (Ward) Custer.  
 Courtesy Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

Custer and Samuel Minerd certainly knew each other. Emanuel was a blacksmith and justice of the peace and would have been intimately familiar with the details of most every household's business and personal affairs.

The Custer era in New Rumley is well established. A statue of George is near the site of the Custer birthplace, now an Ohio state memorial, in New Rumley. Several booklets document the General's childhood in Ohio, including a 1978 booklet, *General Custer and New Rumley, Ohio*, by John M. Carroll, and a 1993 booklet, *Custer's Ohio Boyhood*, by Charles B. Wallace. More excellent published material is on file at the Puskarich Public Library in Cadiz, the seat of Harrison County.

The house where the Custers lived is now gone, but a memorial display stands in its place, along Route 646 in New Rumley. Custer biographer Jeffrey D. Wert has written that the brothers, who were born and grew up there, "shared a bond of deep, abiding affection for each other."<sup>4</sup> Best-selling author, Stephen E. Ambrose, devoted an entire chapter of his book *Comrades to the Custers*, saying that Tom "idolized his older brother in all things, ... most especially in risk taking."<sup>5</sup>



*St. Bartholomew's Evangelical Lutheran Church in New Rumley, where two of Emanuel Custer's infant sons, and many of Samuel Minerd's extended family, are buried. Inset, above*—Gravestone of Emanuel and Maria (Ward) Custer's infant sons, James and Samuel. Photos by author.

## The Migration to Tontogany

In about 1846, faced with the prospect of farming steep hill-sides for the rest of their lives, Samuel and Susanna migrated west with their children to a farm north of Tontogany. They no doubt were attracted to the flat, rich farmland that had once been known as the “Black Swamp”—so named because in an early day, it would not drain. Earlier settlers had cleared the swamps into dry farmland by digging deep ditches and placing “tile” into the ground to draw away the stagnant water—making the fertile earth ideal for raising crops such as wheat and oats. That year, on September 29, Samuel purchased a forty-acre farm, “a part of the Erie & Wabash Canal lands,” from Joseph Jeffries.<sup>6</sup> The Minerds are enumerated in Washington Township, Wood County, in the 1850 census.

The Custers also moved to Wood County, some ten years later, perhaps also attracted by tales of the fertile soil. They came in about 1856, when Thomas W. Custer was about eleven years of age. (Other sources place the year at 1860 [Day’s *Tom Custer*] or 1861 [Wert’s *Custer*], but the 1856 date comes from Emanuel Custer’s obituary in a local newspaper, and thus may be more accurate.) If so, the Custers may have rented a farm for several years before making a purchase.<sup>7</sup>

Anton Wilhelm, a German immigrant, lived in a cabin on the Custer farm circa 1859-1862, and purchased a team of horses and rented a farm. “But before the crops could be gathered [*sic*],” wrote Anton’s son George John Williams in an unpublished memoir, “cattle ranged on to his land and ruined the crops. At that time there were no fences and cattle were allowed to roam free.” When Anton enlisted in the Army during the Civil War, at Emanuel’s suggestion, Emanuel showed him how to sign his name the Americanized way—“Williams.” Wrote George: “Our name has been Williams ever since.”

The Custer house was considered a “large comfortable structure with black walnut beams, hand-hewn sills and rafters and nicely turned woodwork.”

Emanuel and his son Nevin



Old postcard view of Tontogany, Ohio. Author’s collection.

ultimately acquired several tracts, including a farm adjacent to the Minerds’ in April 1860, and thus were close neighbors for many years. Nevin’s farm, about a mile north of his father’s, was known as the “George Fullmer farm.” However, Thomas W. Custer lived on his parents’ farm for only about five years, until his enlistment in the Army in September 1861. The Custer deeds are on file today in the Wood County Office of the Recorder in Bowling Green, Ohio.

### Tommy’s Mother, Rebecca

Tommy’s mother, Rebecca (Minerd) Behme-Kearns was born on June 24, 1850 near Tontogany, the youngest of Samuel and Susanna’s six children. Little is recorded of her early life, except that she grew up in Ohio near Tontogany. Her birth year is confirmed by the 1850 census, when she was enumerated as an infant in her parents’ household. She was five years younger than her future paramour, Thomas W. Custer.

Rebecca and the Custer children—Nevin, Boston, Thomas and Margaret—attended school in a little building north of Tontogany under the supervision of teacher



Left—Map from Griffing Gordon’s 1886 *Atlas of Wood County, Ohio*, showing the proximity of the Nevin Custer and Samuel Minerd farms. Courtesy Wood County District Public Library.



Thomas C. Custer's mother, Rebecca (Minerd) Behme-Kearns.  
Private collection.

Captain Luther Black. (The captain's cousin, Ann, later married Nevin Custer.) Another teacher, Mrs. George W. Carpenter, later told a newspaper interviewer that she:

...taught school in the Custer district two or three consecutive terms. Emmanuel H. Custer, his wife and family lived on the bank of the creek at the place in Wood County you speak of. Boston Custer and Margaret Custer, the youngest two children of the family, went to school to me. As I remember, I had some 40 pupils, and the school house stood across the creek from the home, near the old cemetery.<sup>8</sup>

A map of Wood County published in 1871 displays the Custer and Miner farms side by side, just east of Tontogany Creek. (The forty-acre farm marked "N. J. Custer" was owned by Nevin Custer; the farm marked "S. Miner" belonged to Samuel Miner; and the forty-acre tract marked "Miner & Burdett" was co-owned by Samuel's son Jacob and son-in-law William J. Burditt.) The primary Custer farm was south and west of the Miner farm.<sup>9</sup>

During the Civil War, Tom Custer enlisted in the 21st Ohio Infantry. He distinguished himself for bravery, and was the first U.S. soldier to be awarded two medals of honor—for capturing enemy flags in two battles in Virginia in April 1865, at Namozine Church and Sailor's Creek (sometimes spelled "Saylor's" Creek). During this action, while charging an enemy position, he was wounded in the neck. After the war's end, Tom continued serving in the Army with the 1st U.S. Infantry and the U.S. Seventh Cavalry, primarily in Kansas during the Indian

Wars. The general wrote of their western experiences in his popular book, *My Life on the Plains*.

In 1867, Emanuel and Nevin Custer sold a twenty-acre parcel of their farm to the Minerds, about the time that Emanuel was preparing to move to Monroe, Michigan. With the Custer farm for sale, Emanuel's former tenant Anton Williams borrowed funds from a relative, and used the money as the first payment toward the purchase. The Williamses resided there for many years, and are pictured standing in front of the farmhouse in a well-known photograph.

Nevin remained in Tontogany on his forty-acre farm for several more years, and was the last Custer to reside there. Tom Custer often visited his brother Nevin on this farm, and it was probably during these visits that Tom and Rebecca Miner became acquainted.

Famous, charming and sporting a battle scar, Tom never married, but was popular with young women. In the words of his famous sister-in-law, Libbie, he "honored and liked women extremely." She wrote this in her 1885 book, *Boots and Saddles or Life in Dakota with General Custer*, and went on to say:

Colonel Tom used to pay visits of an unconscionable length to ladies of the garrison, and no amount of teasing on his brother's part would induce him to shorten them. [Tom] never knew, when he started to go home from these visits, but that he would find on the young lady's door-mat his trunk, portmanteau, and satchel—this as a little hint from the general that he was overtaxing the lady's patience.<sup>10</sup>

Biographer Day notes that in Libbie's book, *Tenting on the Plains*, she made "allusions to Tom jumping from 'flower to flower'."<sup>11</sup>

A chronology of Tom's life and military career has been developed by Day and nationally known Civil War expert Brian Pohanka. This excellent work shows that among other times, Tom was granted leaves of absence from December 1869 to March 1870; in February 1871; from January to May 1872; and from December 1872 to January 1873.<sup>12</sup> It is entirely likely that during one or more of these leaves, Tom returned to his brother Nevin's home in Tontogany for a visit, and had his fateful rendezvous with Rebecca Miner.

### Tommy's Life

The exact date of Tommy's birth is not known. One source, his obituary, implies it was 1866. Another source, the federal census of 1880, suggests it was 1870 or 1871, and is considered more accurate by this author. He was named "Thomas C. Custer," and dubbed "Tommy." (His middle name is not known.) Tommy did not receive the Miner name, which would have been a more common practice for children born out of wedlock. Says Day's book, "In a time when such activity carried a social stigma, Rebecca very conspicuously showed no hesitation of naming the boy's father."<sup>13</sup>

Rebecca did not raise the child beyond the first few years, but the responsibility fell to her parents. The federal census for 1880 shows that in the household of Samuel and





**Above**—Thomas Ward Custer. *Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.* **Left**—Nevin and Ann Custer, *courtesy of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.*

Did he make a private arrangement with the Minerds to keep the issue out of the limelight?

When Thomas W. Custer wrote a will in 1873, in Monroe, Michigan, he did not name the son, and left everything to a fiancée and to his mother. In Tom’s Civil War pension papers, on file at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the boy is not identified in any way.<sup>16</sup>

The whereabouts of Tommy’s mother during his early life are unknown. By 1876, she had married Nathaniel Arthur Behme (or Beam) (1851–1914), the son of Julius and Mary Ann (Ketchum) Behme. The Behmes had three children—Fred Behme, Clara (Behme) Jensen Young and

Samuel Behme. In 1890, Rebecca and Nathaniel resided together in Bowling Green. In the 1890s, they migrated to south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Many family portraits of the Behmes were taken in Minnesota. Later still, they moved south to Iowa.

Susan Minerd was nine-year-old grandson “Thomas Custer.” The census indicates that Tommy had attended school within the year, and that both parents had been born in Ohio.<sup>14</sup> Over the years, Samuel took great pains to raise and protect his grandson.

Custer experts have noted the close facial resemblance between son and father, as seen in old photographs of Tommy in a family photograph album. Day’s *Tom Custer* says that Tommy bore “more than a passing resemblance to the Custer clan.”<sup>15</sup>

There is no evidence that the father ever knew the son, or that the Custers ever acknowledged the boy. But penetrating questions remain. Given the longtime friendship between the boy’s grandfathers, and the proximity of their farms, one would suspect the Custers were, at the very least, aware of the boy’s existence. How would Emanuel, who is known to have been very religious, had strong political instincts, and realizing that his soldier-son was not going to take responsibility, have reacted to the possibility that the news might spread to the national press?

### Penetrating Questions

On June 25, 1876, as all Custer scholars know, Thomas W. Custer was killed at the Battle of Little Bighorn, along with four other members of the Custer family—brothers George and Boston, brother-in-law James Calhoun and nephew Harry Armstrong “Autie” Reed.

Many lingering questions about the Custer-Minerd connection will forever be unanswered. How Rebecca Minerd, or her young son, reacted to the news of the Custers’ slaughter will never be known.

There is no evidence to show how the Emanuel Custers felt about Tommy after the devastation at Little Bighorn. What would have been the emotional need of Emanuel and Maria to reach out and connect, especially when the

Minert, Samuel W M 64			1	Farmer	✓	Ohio
Susan W F 64	Wife		1	At home		Ohio
Custer, Thomas W M 9	Grandchild			At home	✓	Ohio
Minert, Jacob W M 35			1	Farmer	✓	Ohio
Louisa W F 29	Wife		1	At home		Ohio
Edith W F 8	Daughter					Ohio

1880 federal census of Wood County showing 9-year-old “Grandchild” Thomas Custer [sic] residing in the household of Samuel and Susan Minert (Minerd).

boy looked so much like his dead father?

Sadly, Maria (Ward) Custer passed away in Monroe on January 14, 1882, the first of Tommy's grandparents to die. The *Sentinel* in Bowling Green reported her death in a one-paragraph story, saying "She used to be a resident of this county, living a mile north of Tontogany. She is said never to have fully recovered from the shock caused by the butchery of her two sons by the Indians in the Big Horn fight."<sup>17</sup>

A decade later, on February 11, 1892, Tommy married his longtime neighbor, Addie Viola Benn (1876-1933), the daughter of William H. and Martha (Brown) Benn. The Reverend George R. Fisher performed the ceremony. The marriage license today is still on file at the Wood County Courthouse in Bowling Green.<sup>18</sup>

The forty-acre farm where Addie grew up was to the east of the MinerD cluster of farms, along the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton (CH&D) Railroad. The Benn farm was just two hundred feet from Nevin J. Custer's farm circa 1886. At the time, Nevin was an absentee owner, residing in Monroe, but certainly he would have had to have known Tommy and his wife.

Later in the same year Tommy and Addie were married, Emanuel Custer died, in Michigan, on November 27, 1892. Tommy's feelings on the loss were not recorded. The news was covered in the *Wood County Sentinel*, but Tommy was not mentioned. The *Sentinel's* article began:

The death of Emanuel Custer [sic], the father of Gen. Geo. A. Custer, at Parsons, Michigan, last week, reminds the sentinel a bit of history not generally known to the people of Wood County. Emanuel Custer and family lived for ten years, from 1856 to 1866, in Washington township, Wood county, on what is now the Armstrong farm one mile north of Tontogany.<sup>19</sup>

Tommy and Addie resided in or near Tontogany. The exact location of their residence is not known. He was employed as an equipment operator in the oilfields of northwest Ohio, providing a livelihood beyond farming that provided more steady wages.

Petroleum had been discovered in quantity in Wood County in 1885. Unfortunately, the oil "had intractable quality problems that threatened to destroy its value," writes Ron Chernow in his national bestseller, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller Sr.* "[Its] high sulfur content corroded machinery and gave off a deadly smell."<sup>20</sup>

The *Commemorative Historical and Biographical Record of Wood County* states that in the year 1895 alone, there were nearly 1,800 new wells in operation in the county: "[T]he driller was at work day and night, and derricks appeared everywhere..."<sup>21</sup>

Socially, Tommy was a member of the John B. Creps Camp, Tontogany, Sons of Veterans No. 61, Division of Ohio (later renamed the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War). The Sons of Veterans had been founded in about 1881 by the national veterans' lobbying organization, the Grand Army of the Republic. Any man could join who could prove ancestry to a GAR member, or to an eligible veteran. Tommy's membership is further evidence that his father's identity was known, that Tommy knew this fact,



Thomas C. and Addie Viola (Benn) Custer, perhaps on their wedding day. Private collection.

and that the truth was widely and favorably accepted.

Sadly, Tommy's grandmother Susanna MinerD died on May 28, 1893, and was buried at Union Hill Cemetery. The specifics of her death are not known. The *Wood County Sentinel* simply reported: "Mrs. S. Miner, north of Tontogany, aged about 80 years, died Sunday, and was buried Tuesday. She was grandmother of Mrs. Thomas Farmer, of [Bowling Green]."<sup>22</sup> This is an excellent example of how Tommy's privacy was protected by the local press. His name as the deceased's grandson could have easily been substituted in print for that of his cousin, Lillian (Jewell) Farmer.

### An Untimely Death

Addie and Tommy suffered a blow on April 25, 1895 when Addie's father, a Civil War veteran, passed away at home. She was to be prostrated by an even greater tragedy a year later.

During the summer of 1896, Tommy came down with a deadly case of typhoid fever. George John Williams, a neighbor, blamed the outbreak of the disease on salt water that had drained from oil wells south of Tontogany into the Portage River, killing all the life in the creeks, and "there was a great stench."



A composite portrait of Addie and Thomas C. Custer, possibly made after his death. Private collection.

Finally, on August 1, 1896, Tommy's body gave up the fight, and he passed away. He was only about twenty-five years of age. Williams later wrote: "I shaved Tommy and helped get him ready for burial." The funeral was held at the Presbyterian Church in Tontogany, possibly led by Reverend C. L. Herald, who had officiated at the funeral of Addie's father a year earlier. Tommy's remains are believed to have been laid to rest in the Union Hill Cemetery east of Tontogany. While his grave is not marked, the approximate spot is still recalled by his elderly cousins, and is being researched further.

His short obituary, quoted earlier, was printed in both the daily and weekly editions of the *Sentinel*. Several days later, the *Sentinel* reported: "The funeral of Thomas Custer was held on Monday...Mr. Custer was a very estimable young man with a large circle of friends, who deeply sympathize with his young widow in her sad bereavement."<sup>23</sup> Among the mourners was Tommy's beloved eighty-one-year-old grandfather, Samuel Miner, whose grief must have been unspeakable.

Tommy's friends in the Sons of Veterans placed an advertisement in the August 7, 1896 edition of the *Sentinel*. It was headlined "On the Death of T. C. Custer," and contained a lengthy resolution of bereavement. It was signed by L. A. McCombs, J. E. Phillips and R. W. Johnson. It read, in part:

Resolved, That the sudden removal of such a life from among us leaves a vacancy and a shadow that will be deeply felt by all the members of our order and a loss to the community and public. Resolved, That with deep sympathy with the bereaved widow and relatives of the deceased we express our hope that even so great loss to us may be overruled by him who doeth all things well."<sup>24</sup>

Tommy's mother, Rebecca, was not in Tontogany at the time of his death. Years later, when she was thousands of miles away in Washington State, and guilt ridden, she wrote to a sister of her regret of having not "come to see my dear boy when he was on his death bed. My heart aches to come home & see you all & my dear old father & the graves of my dear boy & my mother."<sup>25</sup>

Rebecca was obsessed with the idea that she could communicate with her dead son through a séance. In a letter authored in about 1897, she wrote:

Grama & Tomie both have spoken to me through a medium in spiritual circles...Well Tomie came & stood behind me. I could feel his presence near me, & the medium said he was standing with his hand on my shoulder, that it was a young man & a relative of mine. Then she said he is going now up a ladder. He must [have] been in some kind of business he had to climb up. Now she says he is coming down again. Now she says he has a package in his hand & throws it in your lap. I felt it drop in my lap plain as could be. She says he has some papers or a package that he wants you to have that you never got. & for me to try & find out of friends if they knew what it was."<sup>26</sup>

Three years after Tommy's death, she wrote to the sister asking for the address of Tommy's widow, saying "I want to write to her in regards to Tomie. I have something I want to ask her. Please do not forget it & write soon."<sup>27</sup>

**Nephew of Gen. Custer Dead.**  
Saturday evening occurred the death of Tom Custer, at his home at Tontogany, from an attack of typhoid fever. Deceased was aged 30 years, and leaves a wife. He was a nephew of General Custer, of Indian fighting fame. The funeral was held on Monday Tom Custer, father of the deceased, was also killed at the Battle of the Big Horn, where Gen. Custer was slain.

Above—Thomas C. Custer's obituary in the August 6, 1896 edition of the Wood County Sentinel. Right—Thomas C. Custer's friends in the Sons of Veterans published this resolution in the Bowling Green Daily Sentinel on August 7, 1896, just a few days after his death. Both courtesy of Wood County District Public Library.

**On the Death of T. C. Custer.**  
Resolutions on the death of Thomas C. Custer in behalf of John B. Creps camp, Tontogany, S. of V. No. 61, division of Ohio:

Whereas, the great supreme ruler of the universe has in his infinite wisdom removed from among us our worthy brother, Thomas C. Custer, and whereas, the long and intimate relation held with him in the discharge of his duties in our order makes it eminently befitting to record our appreciation of him.

Therefore, be it resolved, that the wisdom and ability which he has exercised in our order will be held in grateful remembrance.

Resolved, That the sudden removal of such a life from among us leaves a vacancy and a shadow that will be deeply felt by all the members of our order and a loss to the community and public.

Resolved, That with deep sympathy with the bereaved widow and relatives of the deceased we express our hope that even so great loss to us may be overruled for good by him who doeth all things well.

Resolved, That our charter be draped for 30 days and a copy of these resolutions be presented to the bereaved widow and spread upon the records of the camp and printed in the county paper.

L. A. McCOMBS,  
J. E. PHILLIPS,  
R. W. JOHNSON,  
Committee.



## The Aftermath

In the years after Little Bighorn, General Custer's widow Libbie worked diligently to preserve the memory of her dead hero-husband and the adventuring brother-in-law she adored. She aggressively fought a propaganda war with journalists and authors who published material critical of the general. Shirley Leckie, in *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth*, wrote, "Her perception of who her husband was and what his life and death meant shaped and colored public opinion until she died. By then more than half a century had passed, and, as she intended, 'tradition and history' had become 'so mingled' that scholars are still untangling the skeins today."<sup>28</sup>

It is impossible to know whether she had any dealings with the *Wood County Sentinel*, but it is entirely possible that she did, and that this information is lost to history.

Libbie was a frequent public speaker in the United States and Europe, drawing large crowds wherever she went. She also authored several best-selling books, including *Following the Guidon* and *Boots and Saddles*. Among other aspects, her popular memoirs bring out the personality of Thomas, who otherwise is a shadowy figure in history.

Over the years, as Tommy's mother lived apart from her aging parents and siblings, she wrote many letters home. They are articulate and filled with feeling. One can sense her longing to be with her relatives again, and the quiet desperation of knowing such a gathering was impossible. In a letter dated November 18, 1901, Rebecca wrote from Washington State:

We are as poor as ever. I don't ever look to be able to have a home any more but if I could only be able to come to see my old home once more I would be satisfied....I can tell you this much it has only been poverty that kept me away from you folks but it takes money to travel. I could not come there & back for less than a hundred.<sup>29</sup>

Rebecca also complained about her health. In an undated letter, she wrote: "I am much healthier here. I had heart trouble so bad & here I do not have them as often. I believe I should [have] been dead long ago had I stayed back in Iowa."<sup>30</sup>

By about 1898, Rebecca and Nathaniel had separated. The marriage had been rocky, and in her own words:

[Son] Fred could not get much work & the old man did not try. I had a good place in a Tailor shop & made from 12 to 15 a week & he did not even try to get me wood. I had to by [sic] coal to roast his shins. His brother Jule told him he could have his team & all the wood if he would haul it & cut it but that was too hard work to go about nine miles to get it but it was not too much for me to wade in the snow up to my knees to work in the winter.<sup>31</sup>

Rebecca made the decision to push further west to Washington State, while their children remained with Nathaniel in Iowa. Once she arrived on the West Coast, she sent a letter home, saying:

I do not know if we will go to Seattle to live or live here. Will decide when Clara gets here. We are getting beautifull [sic] weather here.



Thomas C. Custer's mother, Rebecca (Minerd) Behme-Kearns.  
Private collection.

The grass is nice & green & it is so warm. We have a nice country, no cyclones & very hard storms here which makes it so nice.<sup>32</sup>

At some point, whether in Iowa or in Washington, Rebecca married a man named Kearns. His first name is not known. At first the marriage was smooth—she wrote to a sister about her new married life, saying:

...mine is not what it was in my young days. I don't have a man that comes home & curses me. He is too nice for that. He has never [given] me a cross word in his life & I think sometimes I am not thankfull [sic] enough....My husband thinks the world of [Clara] & is so good to her he don't want her to work [outside the home].<sup>33</sup>

The Kearnses operated a small barber shop of three chairs and five porcelain bath tubs. But the marriage later turned. In a letter from Port Townsend, Washington, Rebecca wrote: "He never tells me his business. Sometimes I think he sends his money to some one I don't know of."<sup>34</sup>

Moving frequently, Rebecca resided in Spokane (1899), Everett (1901), Seattle (1906), Port Townsend (1906) and Blaine (1914-1915). Blaine is in Whatcom County, the most northwest county in Washington State, near the Canadian border. She once sent her sister some ore pellets obtained at mines in British Columbia. Rebecca worked in Seattle as a tailoress.

Homesick, Rebecca wrote to her sister in Tontogany: “Kiss my father for me + tell him I said for you to do so + that I would work my nails off to help to take care of him if I could only do so.”<sup>35</sup> Another time, she wrote: “I wish I was where I could do something to make his old days a little pleasant. I would do all I could for him but here I am away out in this wooly west, many thousand miles away...”<sup>36</sup>

In 1914 and 1915, Rebecca lived with daughter Clara in Blaine. During that time, she suffered from cancer of the uterus, and the disease spread quickly to her bladder and bowels. On August 15, 1915, at the age of sixty-four, she passed away in Blaine. She was laid to rest at the Enterprise Cemetery in—of all places—Custer, Washington.<sup>37</sup>

A distance of about 2,400 miles separates the graves of Tommy and his mother. Ironically, her final resting place is much closer to Thomas Ward Custer’s grave at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

### Addie’s New Family

Shattered by Tommy’s death, Addie continued on with determination to rebuild her life. Circa April 1899, she resided in Haskins, Wood County, and may have held a job in Toledo to generate needed income. In a letter to Tommy’s Aunt Jemima (Minerd) Burditt, Addie wrote:

I hope I can stand the work and won’t get home sick. I feel like my heart weighed a great deal tonight. It’s a great deal harder for me to leave than I ever dreamed of. I could burst out crying at one little word. It hurts me so to have them say good by to me. I can’t hardly stand it. I hope to be stronger in this affair before long...It will be hard for me to get acquainted with all the strange people but such is life.<sup>38</sup>

Two years later, on June 20, 1901, Addie married John P. Cain (1866–1949), a native of Oil City, Pennsylvania.<sup>39</sup> They resided in Bowling Green and went on to have six children—Audene McFarland, Helen Hadley, Edith Koch, Ralph Cain, Emerson Cain and Shirley Cain.

Tommy’s grandfather Samuel Minerd outlived him by eight years. In 1900, he was residing in the home of son Jacob Minerd near Tontogany. By late 1904, he was living with daughter Jemima Burditt, on his old farm. Around Christmas of that year, the *Bowling Green Daily Sentinel* said that “Grandpa Miner who has been sick for the last two weeks is no better.”<sup>40</sup> He passed away at Jemima’s home on December 29, 1904, at age eighty-nine, and was buried beside his wife at Union Hill Cemetery east of Tontogany.

Addie continued to adore her first husband’s family. She often visited with Tommy’s aunts and cousins, and

they enjoyed sewing together. She was named as a surviving relative in the 1914 *Daily Sentinel* obituary of one of Tommy’s aunts, Jemima (Minerd) Burditt.<sup>41</sup>

Over the years, when her children were young, Addie often took them to the Union Hill Cemetery for picnics. While they played, she often would walk a short distance away, and spend time by herself, as remembered many years later by her daughter Helen Hadley. During these times, Addie presumably visited Tommy’s unmarked grave.

When Addie died on June 8, 1933, her newspaper obituary did not acknowledge her first marriage to Tommy. John Cain outlived Addie by sixteen years. He passed away on June 26, 1949. They rest for eternity in Union Hill Cemetery.



Two views of the Emanuel Custer homestead near Tontogany, Ohio, ca. 1880s, in the years when it was owned by the Anton Williams family. Top photo has never been published before. Photographs courtesy of the author.

## Tontogany After the Custers

The old Custer farmhouse, at the southwest corner of the Tontogany Creek and the Cross Creek Roads, was later sold to Anton Williams, and converted to a blacksmith shop.

In 1949, reporter Wayne Collier of the *Bowling Green Sentinel*, accompanied by co-workers, drove to the old Custer home to determine if the general himself had ever lived there. Collier interviewed its owner, Rosina Williams, and his resulting story reported:

We were motoring along a winding road which at that point hugs the east bank of Tontogany Creek and which stream a few miles below enters the historic Maumee River. About a mile out of the village of Tontogany,...over a private bridge, a grey dirt streak rises from this highway to meet a pleasant farm home reposing comfortably upon the shoulder of a bluff. Conspicuously placed at the bridge entrance is the announcement: "General Custer Home-stead." The situation was inviting.<sup>42</sup>

Collier also interviewed former Tontogany teacher Mrs. George W. Carpenter. She told him that "The family all looked up to George, later the general. It was at the beginning of the Civil War that I lived there and George was back and forth, getting ready to enter the service."<sup>43</sup>

In 1970, the structure was dismantled by the then-owner "after determining it was too rickety and too dangerous for visitors, many of whom were Boy Scouts," said the *Bowling Green Daily Sentinel Tribune*. Six years later, during the nation's bicentennial, parts of the old house were auctioned, including "the back door, a chair rail, a baseboard [and] window frames..."<sup>44</sup>

Beverly (Hansen) Miner of Bowling Green stumbled onto the "Tommy" story when researching the genealogy of her husband, Charles Robert "Bob" Miner, in about 1984. While interviewing elderly Edna (Miner) Asmus, one of Tommy's first cousins, Edna mentioned offhandedly that "Aunt Beck was married to General Custer's brother." Beverly became intrigued, and began to dig into this question, and also talked with Addie's daughter Helen Hadley. Generously, Beverly shared her findings with biographer Carl Day, and later with the author of this

article, and the story has caught fire.



**Mark A. Miner** is founder of Mark Miner Communications, LLC, a strategic marketing and public relations firm serving the professions. In 2005, he was inducted into the Renaissance Hall of Fame by the Pittsburgh Chapter, Public Relations Society of America, for his "significant, lasting contributions to the advancement of public relations in the Pittsburgh region." In 2003, his MinerD.com genealogy and history website was named one of the "Top 10 Family Web Sites" in the nation by *Family Tree Magazine*. He also has served as president of the National MinerD-Minard-Miner-Minor Reunion since 1995. He resides with his wife Liz in Beaver, Pennsylvania. Contact him at [markminer@mindspring.com](mailto:markminer@mindspring.com).

Today, there are no significant historical markers or monuments in Tontogany to honor the Custer family's residence there, especially during the Civil War years when their sons rose to national fame for their bravery in battle.

Tommy Custer's grave remains unmarked. According to a recent issue of the *Sentinel-Tribune*, "There is no tombstone or sexton's record of him, only the wisp of a family memory of his widow visiting the cemetery." The article also says that "No birth or death records have been located... The records might have been misplaced, and also, 'illegitimacy at that time was hidden'..."<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps it is time to complete the story that has been under cover for far too long. ★

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### TONTOGANY'S SECRET... from page 23

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### LINGERING CLOUDS... from page 12

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30. Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull, Champion of the Sioux*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1932) 153, relates that at the announcement of the prophecy "the people rejoiced. They knew what that meant. Those white men... who made war without a just cause, were coming to their camp. Since they were coming upside down, the Indians knew the soldiers would be killed there."
31. John Stands in Timber, *Cheyenne Memoirs*, 192.
32. Wooden Leg, *Fought Custer*, 214; on Foolish Elk see Michno, *Noon*, 119-120, et seq.
33. Both quoted in W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth*, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1953) 46-47; hereafter cited as Graham, *Myth*. Richard Hardorff's well researched *Hokahey! A Good Day to Die*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) updates the sources and the estimates, but the jury is still out.
34. David Humphreys Miller, *Custer's Fall: The Indian Side of the Story*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957) 254-255.
35. John Stands in Timber, *Warrior*, 204.
36. Gall quoted in Graham, *Myth*, 91.
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39. "They live together" in Lakota, also rendered as "lodge group", the basic unit of Teton Sioux social organization; *HNAI*, Vol. 13, Pt. 2, 799-801.
40. Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984) 420. An impressive "Warriors at the Little Bighorn" (incomplete and still "in progress") name list with tribal and band affiliation, date of death, and additional remarks is posted by the Friends of the Little Bighorn Battlefield on their website: <http://www.friendslittlighborn.com>
41. It was customary for Indian warriors to boast of their war deeds; they even had them painted on their beautifully decorated war-shirts. But with the Custer fight it was another matter, particularly when questioned by Whites; at least initially, the Indian participants tended to be tight-lipped, or gave "edited" testimonies for fear of retribution which, again according to the old ways, was to be expected from "the enemy."
42. Thomas B. Marquis, *Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself*, (Algonac, Mich.:

- Reference Publications, 1976); see also J. D. Spencer, "George Armstrong Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn: Homicide or Mass Suicide?" *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 29(3), 1983, 756-761.
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  44. Michno, *Noon*, 203. The bodies of Custer's fallen soldiers were all mutilated to varying degrees by the victorious warriors and angered Indian women. The long exposure to the hot sun soon added to their rapid decomposition, and when two days later Reno and Benteen's troopers began the gruesome task of attempting to identify and bury their dead comrades, they were "nearly unrecognizable." In fact, only "40 percent of [Custer's] dead were identified [as compared with] 92 percent of those with Reno-Benteen... the disfigurement resulting from wounds, mutilation, bloating, and discoloration. Credit must be given to those men who had the fortitude... of burying the putrefying bodies;" Scott, Willey, and Connor, *Soldiers' Bones*, 114-117.
  45. Gordon Richard, "Battlefield Detectives: Custer's Last Stand," *LBHA Newsletter*, December 2003, 8.
  46. Connell, *Morning Star*, 306-307.
  47. Minneconjou chief Red Horse, who five years later authored an account, a detailed map, and some forty-one equally detailed, brightly colored pencil pictographic drawings of the battle "thought this second group of soldiers made five brave stands as the Indians drove them back;" *ibid.*, 189; see also Viola, *Untold Indian Story*, 82-103; and Brizée-Bowen, *For All to See*, 78-91.
  48. While everyone agreed on the need and appropriateness of a memorial to the Indians, at the dedication some Indian and White visitors alike did not fully appreciate its location, situated "below" that of the Seventh Cavalry, the design (this obviously a very subjective matter), and the cost of \$2.3 million appropriated by Congress while many Indians still need the basics on the Northern Cheyenne and Sioux reservations.
  49. When the call went out from the Indian Bureau ordering all "roving" bands of Indians to report to their respective agencies by January 31, 1876, or else be considered hostile, the two main targets of that Washingtonian politico-military scam were the anti-treaty chiefs Sitting Bull and his Hunkpapa, and Crazy Horse with his Oglala (the "friendly" Oglalas were already for the most part "pacified" agency Indians under Red Cloud). The two "hostile" leaders thus became the catalyst for the dissatisfied Northern Cheyenne and other recalcitrant Lakota and Dakota bands. The late spring-early summer of 1876 witnessed the last large gathering of these unyielding hunters of the Northern Plains. After their pyrrhic victory over Custer, relentless military pressure forced, one by one, the surrender of most Cheyenne and Sioux bands. In the spring of 1877, Crazy Horse, who disingenuously believed he would be granted a reservation in his beloved *Paha Sapa* brought his Oglalas to Fort Robinson, Nebraska, only to be killed there in September of that year. Meanwhile, Sitting Bull and Inkpaduta had found refuge in Canada, the Grandmother's Country across the so-called medicine line. Inkpaduta never surrendered and died of old age near Batoche, Saskatchewan, in 1879. Homesick and no longer welcome in Canada, Sitting Bull reluctantly returned to surrender with most of the remaining Hunkpapas at Fort Buford, North Dakota in 1881. Still, a few of his followers who did not trust the Americans chose to stay in Canada. They were right, as their chief was killed by Standing Rock Indian police in December of 1890. See Joseph Manzione, *I'm Looking to the North for My Life: Sitting Bull, 1876-1881*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1991); Van Nuys, *Inkpaduta*, 404-413; Gontran Lavolette, *The Sioux Indians in Canada*, (Regina, Sask.: privately printed, 1944) 83-101, 115, 121.
  50. The name Sioux is derived from a shortened French rendering of the Ottawa (Algonquian) designation *natowessiwak*, in turn related to Proto-Algonquian *natowewa*, meaning "Northern Iroquoian," and to *atowe*, "speaking a foreign language." The cognate *natawewa* (literally: "seeker of heat") refers to the eastern massasauga, a small rattlesnake, and was extended to designate, again, the Northern Iroquoians, and later the Sioux; *HNAI*, Vol. 13, Pt. 2, 749. The Lakota constitute the western branch of the greater Sioux Nation and are divided into seven main tribes: Hunkpapa, 'At the Entrance Head [or horn, of the horse-shoe shaped village]', indicating their traditionally assigned location in the camp; Blackfeet, *Sihhasapa*, from the color of their moccasins; Sans Arcs, *Itazipčo*, 'Without Bows,' referring to some historical incident; Two Kettles, *Oohenunpa*, 'Two Boilings,' in reference to two kettles of cooked food; Minneconjou, 'Plant by the Water,' a folk-etymology referring to their pre-horse agricultural habits; Brule (or Brulé), *Sicangu*, 'Burnt Thigh', probably also referring to a historical incident; and Oglala, 'Scatter Their Own,' allegedly attributed to their quarreling character; *ibid.*, 755-756. The popular tripartite division of Sioux (east to west) into *Dakota/Santee*, *Nakota/Yankton-Yanktonai*, and *Lakota/Teton*, though ethnohistorically valid has no linguistic equivalent, whereas Yankton-Yanktonai do not speak an "n" dialect as commonly